

FIRE Ministry Survives After Brownsville Split in Pensacola

Founder Michael Brown says independence from Brownsville Assembly of God has helped refine his ministry focus

Michael Brown's tenure as president of the Brownsville Revival School of Ministry (BRSM) was dead. Fired from the post on Dec. 17, 2000, by Brownsville Assembly of God (AG) leaders for what they said were irreconcilable differences in the implementation of the school's vision, Brown said he had a clear word from God to immediately start another school of ministry.

The church split that rocked one of America's longest revivals—when Brown, most of BRSM's faculty and half its student body left to form a new school—painfully lives on today in separate camps in the same city of Pensacola, Fla.

BRSM has replaced and expanded its faculty as well as its curriculum since Brown's departure. But Brown said his independence from the denominational church structure at Brownsville AG has enabled him to give an even sharper focus to his vision for raising up radical servants who will answer the Great Commission with zeal and skill. Much of Brown's vision is spelled out in his book *Revolution* (see).

"It was difficult to be a church-planting movement and part of a church that had denominational church-planting rules," Brown told *Charisma*. "To us, the issue of apostolic fathering could not be fully released in that denominational framework. That, by the way, is a big part of why the separation happened."

Brown's school, FIRE (Fellowship for International Revival and Evangelism) is thriving. At least, during FIRE's fall semester 2001, more than 500 students jammed classrooms and attended worship services at the church formed shortly after the school began in January 2001.

"In a certain way, everything that our old school [BRSM] was, FIRE just continued to be, but with greater focus, expression and intensity, but at another location," he said. That Brown and former BRSM staffers were able to get a school up and running just a month after his firing is a divine miracle, as far as Brown and FIRE staffers are concerned.

"We had no campus, no facilities, no offices, no computers, phones, phone lines, furniture, databases or money," Brown said. "But we had a clear word from the Lord to continue our work here."

Just two weeks before the first scheduled FIRE classes were to begin, with more than 500 national and international students committed to show up, FIRE still had no place to meet. Then God came through, Brown said.

Brown had shared with Greg Burns, pastor of New Dimensions Christian Center, an independent Pentecostal African American church, that he was disturbed that the Brownsville Revival drew mostly white people—and that he was praying for God to mix the revival racially. Meanwhile Burns was praying that God would bring white people into his black church.

"[Burns] had been praying for a white harvest in his church and felt it was from the Lord to open the doors of his church to us, even though he has more than 2,000 already attending on

a weekly basis," Brown said.

FIRE uses New Dimensions' facilities for larger classes and for Thursday night church services and Sunday night services. While an incredible blessing, New Dimensions' support for FIRE was not all that God had in store to resolve the school's space needs, Brown said.

New Hope Church, another nondenominational black Pentecostal body in Pensacola, had just purchased a 17,000-square-foot building—yet it had only 30 members. New Hope pastor J.L. Savage asked God what His purpose was for all that space. Brown knew the answer.

FIRE now pays the mortgage on New Hope—not as owners but as tenants—and uses the space for administrative offices and smaller classrooms. New Hope and New Dimensions are located close to each other, so FIRE is able to operate in the same area of Pensacola.

FIRE employs a team method of leadership in which Brown is senior team leader. Although Brown is president of FIRE and senior pastor of the church, he has no power to make independent decisions of any major nature concerning either entity. The leadership team discusses issues and business, and they move forward when they have unity, Brown said.

"We don't see the hired pastor with a board of non-elder people as the primary New Testament church," Brown said, referring to BRSM's submission to a board of directors who were not elders at Brownsville AG. "We believe God can and will work through many different forms," Brown said. "We are simply seeking to follow Scripture as close as we can for our

own lives.”

Students are offered college-credited courses in a two-year core program that also provides hands-on experience in a voluntary third-year internship. The internship could be a stint on a traveling ministry team, service on a foreign missions field or working in a church ministry in the United States.

“We have some 85 graduates plus family members either on the mission field or on their way to the mission field in probably about 20 different countries,” Brown said.

Brown’s vision of FIRE as a catalyst for answering God’s call to plant churches around the world has linked the school with pastor Ché Ahn and prayer leader Lou Engle, who direct The Call prayer events.

For The Call Washington, D.C., on Sept. 2, 2000, BRSM, led by Brown, loaded up 790 people on 15 buses and drove 20 hours to the nation’s capital to participate. Brown gave away 80,000 copies of his Revolution book. On Sept. 22, 2001, FIRE took 325 people for a 33-hour bus ride to participate in The Call New England in Boston.

Though Brown’s departure from Brownsville AG was a painful chapter in his call to raise up youth and future leaders, he sees the resulting freedom in positive terms for accomplishing the mission he believes God has handed him.

“We deeply appreciate our time at Brownsville and fully recognize the awesome things that God did during the revival,” Brown said. “But having our own community has enabled us to

more fully express some of our ministry convictions—to provide a strong emphasis on church planting and raising up spiritual fathers to this generation.”

Asked whether he would consider relocating FIRE to another city, Brown said: “Not in the foreseeable future, but we have had offers from several locations.”

Billy Bruce in Pensacola, Fla.